

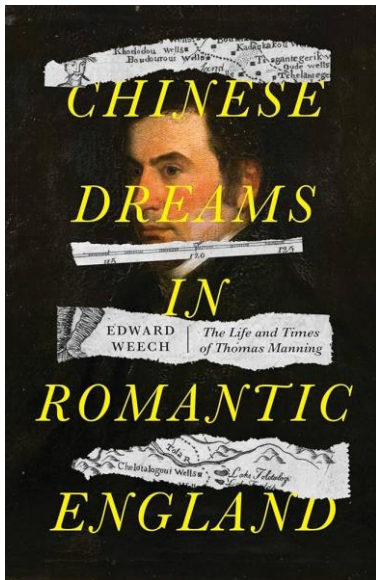
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reads

*Chinese Dreams in Romantic England:
The Life and Times of Thomas Manning*

by Edward Weech¹

THOMAS MANNING (1772–1840), A CLOSE FRIEND of Charles Lamb and a member of Coleridge’s circle, arrived at Canton in 1807, and became the first Briton to enter Lhasa. T. H. Barrett points out that he was the only person in the world who had met both the Dalai Lama and Napoleon.² Manning was among the first Englishmen to study Chinese language and culture, and stayed in China for nearly ten years, working neither as a missionary nor as a businessman, but as an independent scholar seeking to compile an ‘empirical survey’ of Chinese society. Manning’s life reveals a forgotten and marginalized story of Sinocentric Romanticism, and it also



highlights the broader complexity of cultural exchange between Britain and China at the dawn of the Opium War. Edward Weech’s *Chinese Dreams in Romantic England* is the first full-length biography of Thomas Manning, based on the rediscovery of Manning’s archive in 2014, which made it possible for us to understand the true nature of Manning’s dream. Weech’s project does significant justice to the memory of this remarkable man, who has been neglected and misunderstood for centuries.

Chinese Dreams in Romantic England is constructed chronologically in seven chapters, according to Manning’s various experiences at different life stages: ‘Early life’, ‘Romantic, 1798–1801’, ‘France, 1802’, ‘Delay and departure, 1803–1806’, ‘Canton, 1807–1809’,

‘On the skirts of creation, 1810–1816’, and finally ‘Home again’. During his early life, three points need to be emphasized. First, from a well-represented Norfolk family, his father William Manning, a liberal-minded man, had a major influence on Thomas Manning’s views about the abolition of the slave trade and the rights of religious minorities, which helps to explain why he conceived his unconventionally intercultural project. Second, before determining to learn

¹ Edward Weech, *Chinese Dreams in Romantic England: The Life and Times of Thomas Manning* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

² Barrett, ‘Learning and Outcomes in Early Anglophone Sinological Translation: The Case of Thomas Manning (1772–1840)’, *Crossing Borders: Sinology in Translation Studies* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2022), 100.

Chinese, Manning enjoyed a classical education, studying Greek and Mathematics at Caius College, Cambridge (his main achievement during this period was the publication of *An Introduction to Arithmetic and Algebra* in two volumes between 1796 and 1798). Third, although Manning's passion for mathematics may have helped to stimulate his interest in Chinese—as Gottfried Leibniz had already explored the association between a Chinese classic, *Yijing*, and 'the true nature of science' (30)—Weech notes a more direct connection to Manning's early encounter with China: his school held a performance of Arthur Murphy's tragedy *Orphan of China* in 1784, which was originally inspired by the Chinese play *The Orphan of Zhao* (趙氏孤兒 *zhao shi guer*) from the Yuan Dynasty.

In August 1798, Manning began tutoring Charles Lloyd, who also had received instruction from Coleridge. Hence, Lloyd introduced Manning to figures at the heart of British Romanticism, especially Charles Lamb and Coleridge. Lamb further arranged a meeting for Manning and Coleridge. After the meeting, Lamb informed Manning that Coleridge had 'conceived a most high [. . .] opinion of you' and 'Coleridge inquires after you pretty often' (53). Manning's 'Romantic' stage was not only marked by his interaction with Romanticists, but also represented by his own 'Grand Tour' to key locales, where he was always keen to gain first-hand observations of local manners and customs—and this also explains the motivation for his Chinese odyssey.

Owing to his Romantic mind as well as a longing for the opportunity to learn Chinese, Manning arrived in Paris in 1802. Weech explains that his visit was embraced by serendipitous encounters with legendary figures such as Napoleon, Thomas Paine, and William Taylor, who would introduce Manning to Joseph Hager, Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale. With extraordinary courage and stubborn determination, Manning was obsessed with the first-hand observation of Chinese civilization, on which he devoted the best years of his youth. Weech suggests that Manning might have been deflected from the path he had chosen, not only by the great worries his family and friends harbored about his future, but also by the serious obstacles he faced in launching the journey during the Napoleonic wars. Nevertheless, Manning never gave up. His 'motives and nature' (86) of the projected journey further gained sympathy from both Napoleon and Sir Joseph Banks—the former granted a passport for him to leave France at the beginning of 1805, and the latter helped him to secure the support from the East India Company; it was on Banks's recommendation that the Company's Court of Directors consented to Manning's request to reside in their Factory in Canton. These details are well demonstrated in chapter 4.

Manning arrived in Canton on 13 January 1807, but Canton was only a means by which Manning hoped to enter the interior area. Here he renewed his acquaintance with Sir George Thomas Staunton, whose father was the principal secretary of the Macartney Embassy; Samuel Ball, who was also a friend of Charles Lamb, serving on the Council of the Royal Asiatic Society in London in his later years; and Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary

to China who compiled the first printed Chinese-English dictionary. Weech argues that life in Canton, though, was not easy for Manning because of a strict policy that forbade him from pursuing empirical observations on local culture. According to Qing policy, foreigners were not allowed to leave the 'factory district' at the edge of the Pearl River, and the only opportunity to go further afield was afforded by the privilege granted 'every ten days for a small group to visit a nearby garden' (103). Nevertheless, Manning endeavoured to learn the language and made progress with his Chinese tutor Abel Yen, who was a Latin-speaking Catholic. Hence Manning enthusiastically wrote to his father that 'The veiled mysteries of the Chinese language gradually open upon my view' (110) and 'Even the discovery of the tones . . . is in my opinion a full recompense for the journey' (111). However, the prohibition in Canton ultimately proved to be an obstacle, as Manning once sneaked out of the English factory but was captured and returned by 'two porters in a hamper slung on a pole' (118), forcing him to conceive another route into the interior to embark on his proto-sociological project.

Weech points out that Manning's idea of the Tibetan route probably came from Joshua Marshman, a British Christian missionary in Bengal, who produced the first direct English translation of the Confucian work *Analects* and had written Manning a series of letters to seek help on his translations. In December 1811, with plenty of good luck, Manning entered Lhasa with his Chinese interpreter, Zhao Jinxiu, in the guise of a Buddhist pilgrim. A few days later, Manning visited the Dalai Lama, and he was extremely impressed by the child Lama's personal charm and his 'poetically and affectingly beautiful' face (133). Unfortunately, in early April, Manning was expelled from Tibet, since Yang Chun, a local official, had reported to Peking about his suspicions on Manning's real identity as a Catholic missionary.³ As required by Emperor Jiaqing, Manning was merely deported, but his assistant Zhao was banished to Ili, the remotest place deep into the North-West Xinjiang. Manning recorded his Tibetan journey in a manuscript diary, which was written up into a fair draft later for his family, and finally published decades after his death by Sir Clements Markham as *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet, and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* (1876). This work was one of the main sources about Tibet available to British readers at that time. Weech shows how Manning adopted a comic persona and stream-of-consciousness style of reflection in his writing, rather than distinguishing his account as 'the first Romantic response to the Himalayas' (126).

Despite his misfortunes in Tibet, Manning was lucky, Weech believes, because his linguistic achievements and scholarly status allowed him an appointment as a translator in the Amherst Embassy (1816–17); this was a 'timely capstone' (141). Thus, Manning finally realized his dream of visiting the interior of the country. Notwithstanding the fact that Manning's opportunity to carry on his empirical research about cultural norms was limited, Weech notes

³ Yang Chun's reports are now reserved in the First Historical Archives of China.

that he tried to purchase Chinese books and discuss Chinese medicine with some locals (146). More surprisingly, on his way back England in 1817, Manning was granted an interview with the incarcerated Napoleon at St. Helena, who expressed his interest in hearing about Manning's encounter with the Dalai Lama. As Weech records, Manning had recruited two Chinese men to accompany him back home. One of them is Mr. Li, who made 'a certain impact on Regency society' (151) and helped Manning with his Chinese research.

In the last chapter, 'Home Again', Weech highlights Manning's article on Chinese jokes published in 1826: 'Chinese Jests', which comprised an introductory preface and English translation of forty Chinese jokes, appearing in the *New Monthly Magazine and Library Journal*. This was the only work on China that Manning published during his lifetime. Instead of translating a popular novel, Weech argues that Manning's decision to translate jokes represented his belief in 'sociological insights' (153), as he 'appealed to the common sense of the general public' in the knowledge that 'jokes that circulate widely are effective only because the notions they imply are, in fact, commonly held' (154). Meanwhile, Weech also illustrates the possible reasons for Manning's silence about his intellectual output, such as 'his disdain for fame and his diffidence about publishing' (165), as well as his 'perfectionism' and 'miscalculating his length of days' (167).

In his conclusion, Weech insightfully considers why Thomas Manning wanted to learn about China. Influenced by the debates of Enlightenment philosophers who sought to explain the fundamental principles of human nature and social organization, and in order to find a solution for the social reform of British society, Manning regarded Chinese civilization as a good candidate for his research. Most importantly, according to Weech, 'Manning believed that sympathetic contact with local people was necessary to form a genuine understanding of foreign cultures' (158). Manning had two pathways to pursue this goal: (1) linguistics and (2) manners and customs. He studied Chinese prepositions and particles in comparison to Ancient Greek, believing that if they were examined closely enough, they could be paraphrased into underlying ideas, and those underlying rules of different language systems might shed light on some common nature in the 'workings of the human mind' (174). Hence, Weech claims that Manning's interests in Chinese philology represent his philosophical and proto-sociological pursuits. Furthermore, Manning thought that studying Chinese culture might help to inform social progress in Britain, which implied that 'both societies were subject to the same underlying laws and patterns of development' (180).

Weech's study deserves further attention among scholars of Romanticism. Yet, in his investigation of Neoplatonism and Manning's 'Great Disembodied ONE' (190), there is a lack of background discussion of contemporary debates during Manning's own time—for example, Robert Morrison's comparative study on the affinity between Neoplatonism and Neo-Confucianism in a letter to the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner* in 1819, which could also indicate some of his

potential sources. Notwithstanding, Weech's comprehensive biography not only reveals Manning's eccentric intellectual devotion, his extraordinary courage, as well as an open-mindedness and cultural sympathy on the multiplicity of human values in an age of imperialism, but also implies a wider reception of China in the English intellectual tradition (particularly, Romanticism) that opens the door for further inquiry into the genre of 'Romantic Sinology'.